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ABSTRACT

A collaborative teaching model that replaces the hierarchical graduate teaching assistant (TA)/tutor structure can be used to train basic writing TAs with a pedagogy that stresses reflection and dialogue. Usually, new graduate students tutor for a semester in Basic Writing classrooms and then later move on to teach their own classes; in this case, however, the tutor or apprentice became a teacher alongside the more experienced TA. The two instructors who developed this model consistently critiqued each other's classroom performances. They understood how and why they were involved in this close professional relationship and so heavily invested in the class. When looking over their pedagogical and structural experiment, one site of negotiation was clearly a winner for both of them. The tutor was clearly interested in computer-mediated communication; the TA was not. However, when the TA agreed to allow the tutor to hold class every Wednesday in the computer room, a number of things were accomplished. The tutor was able to establish an area of expertise; the teaching assistant was able to observe another teaching approach at work. Like many teachers discovering the computer classroom, the TA had only to look at the amount of copy produced in a single period to be convinced of its value. Finally, the two instructors negotiated a system for evaluating portfolios of student writing together. (TB)

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ED 384 032

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Conference on College Composition and Communication '95

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Training Basic Writing Teachers Through Collaboration: Exploring Pedagogies Through Performance

This paper is an extension of a classroom collaboration in which two graduate students negotiated their very different ideas about and experiences with teaching. We wanted to develop more effective teaching strategies while meeting the needs of a diverse Basic Writing classroom. This collaboratively written paper first contextualizes and then describes the methodology of this classroom. We introduce two characters, Dan and Mike (as representations of ourselves), whose voices help us to better illustrate our points.

In this paper we offer a collaborative teaching model that replaces the hierarchical graduate TA/tutor structure used to train Basic Writing TA's with a pedagogy that stresses reflection and dialogue. The negotiation we established between us as teachers carried over to our student-teacher relationships as well as student-student interactions. Dialogue was made possible through the exploration of our roles as teachers, students, participants, and learners.

Graduate students recognize their responsibilities in and out of the classroom. We view graduate students as pre-professionals trading their service to the university for more education and training. We should be encouraged to explore the possibilities of the classroom without interference.

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Our students also need to be aware of who is teaching them. We are not yet well paid professionals, getting middle class wages for our instruction, but are instead eking out a living under the poverty line. And we are trying to accomplish our own classwork and writing while maintaining these classrooms. Easily, we can find ourselves emulating the marginally effective classrooms of our research-oriented mentors. Perhaps we need more mentoring from peers. We also need mentoring from educators when we are educating, as we need scholarly guidance when pursuing scholarship.

Usually, new graduate students tutor for a semester in Basic Writing classrooms and then later move on to either lead discussion sections of large literature classes or teach their own classes. The tutor position is seen as a step toward working as a classroom teacher. It is clearly hierarchical. Our proposal counteracts the hierarchy and questions the assignment of roles--particularly that of the subordinate tutor helping the more experienced teacher.

When Pamela Gay, at that time the director of Basic Writing at Binghamton, proposed that the two of us work collaboratively, we thought it would be an interesting opportunity. First, Dan had a semester's experience as the instructor of a similar class and Mike was finishing a semester in the tutorial center. We were each prepared to take on more responsibility in the classroom than a more structured model would allow.

Our department's teacher-training is not unique. We were teaching the only section of a little respected class, Basic Writing II, in a literature department mostly disinterested in investigating pedagogy. Because the director of Basic Writing was on sabbatical, Dan and I were left mostly to ourselves. We did not have to report to anyone, which combined with the location of our classroom on the margins of the campus, afforded us the opportunity to teach with very little faculty supervision or observation. We had to rely upon ourselves to provide structure for our classroom.

Our collaborative model differs from team-taught or co-taught classes in that team-taught and co-taught classes generally depend upon a division of labor in which two teachers teach their own subject. The class gets a clear, monological presentation of each teacher's expertise and then the two teachers find a way to fit the bodies of knowledge together, or set the two bodies of knowledge up in relation to each other. However, in the classroom presented here, the subject of the class was writing, the goals of the two teachers were similar, if not the same, and the students were exposed to two different approaches to the same subject matter.

Both teachers were learning and experimenting with their pedagogies. It would have been difficult and unreasonable (and unfair) to keep this fact hidden from students. They knew Mike was learning how to teach, and he asked for and received numerous critiques. He was interested in keeping the pedagogy dynamic enough to change with each new class encountered. Students were included in this structure.

Opening up the class is not a pedagogy in itself, but a way of developing a dialogic pedagogy that changes to meet the needs and demands of the students. Mike feared preparing the perfect class for a perfect student group, but never meeting that group of students. The solution was to take each class member into consideration--for each classroom has its own dynamics. We try to take these dynamics into account and then discuss how these variables have changed the classroom. For instance, tutorial sessions were tailored to meet the demands of individuals--usually advanced ESL students asked for more grammar while speakers of marginalized englishes wanted to know what they could and could not say in formal papers.

But still, the question looms. How does this classroom differ from team taught or co-taught classes? Often, the classroom that is team-taught is run by one instructor and then the other. In our classroom, both educators were always present. We constantly observed, critiqued, and evaluated each other's teaching. Sometimes these observations were shared with the class. Even more exciting were classes where we invited critique from students.

We were able to divide the responsibilities differently than the hierarchical structure which was suggested by the labels teacher and tutor. Our labels were fluid as they described tasks or roles rather than defining individuals. Mike was not "the tutor." Instead, he often played that role--yet Dan participated in tutorials as well. We both instructed the class but neither of us was "the" teacher. This is more than a semantic game because we were forced to act on this fluid role-definition in each class period.

Mike's primary goal was to have people engaged. It was crucial that the students be given freedom to find their voices and own direction in the course. While Dan shared this, he also felt compelled by the title and the nature of the course to see that the class learn certain skills. There is no contradiction between these goals but a difference in emphasis. Dan felt certain responsibilities to the academy and to the students. It was important to him that we set reasonable goals and finish the course having made progress in editing. While it was great to have the students pursue whatever they were individually interested in, certainly making excellent progress in articulating their ideas and organizing their arguments, Dan was aware that students would be expected to write more formally for other classes.

While we both shared similar goals, Dan tended to lean toward specific lesson plans for each class. Before we started the course, in some ways, Dan anticipated that Mike was too enamored of liberatory pedagogy, while Mike anticipated that Dan would be too conservative and monologic. Both our fears were unfounded. What allowed us to effectively combine both teaching philosophies was the strong sense of team-building where the students' best interests were at heart. Dan became much more open and flexible to experimentation, and Mike realized that (some) students do need more guidance and direction.

Mike has a more complicated metaphoric representation for his pedagogy (as performance). He likes to think of himself as the leader of a jazz band: "Class starts off with a basic melody set to a rhythm and tempo--the goal is for students to get the 'feel' of the music, just

as the teacher needs to recognize when to fade into the background. There is dissonance at times, but the musicians have to be trusted to pull the class out of chaos and back into harmony, although I find that this model does not account for the tone deaf.

What I see as the beauty of this construction is that students are often able to reach goals beyond instructor's expectations. But those individual students have to be willing to take control of the 'melody'. They have to listen to teachers as well as each other to get a feel for the music, or the classroom discourse. Students have to lead when they are ready, after listening and following in preparation. One drawback is that there is much risk involved." This model depends upon risk and improvisation: sometimes it soars, but occasionally it flops. The chance is taken, and the risk keeps it energized. Sometimes this can enliven silent classrooms.

Some of our practices provided flexibility. On one occasion Dan had to miss class. Usually Dan would have had to cancel class. Instead, Mike taught. Even though Mike had not been the lone teacher in the classroom before, this was not intimidating because he had been a full participant in the classroom all along. He and the class had already formed a relationship, so his first solo teaching venture was relieved of its usual stress. Similarly, when Mike attended CCCC last year, he missed two class days but Dan moved from his new role of tutor back into his older primary teaching role.

We consistently critiqued each others' classroom performances. We understood how and why we were involved in this close professional relationship and so heavily invested in this class. We had no outside authority hanging over our heads. The lack of supervision enabled us to remain committed to our professional relationship yet maintain a deep-reaching critique of each other. Perhaps this impression needs further explanation. If there were an outside authority awaiting our failure or slippage--a senior faculty monitor or supervisor--we would have been forced into a resistant solidarity. Open critique would have been a break in solidarity and a failure of resistance (joining the powers-that-be) and would have been perceived as threatening.

The presence of any departmental authority would have significantly altered the mutually critical and constructive relationship that we had. We were also able to carry this liberating dialogue from our private office into the public classroom.

When looking over our pedagogical and structural experiment, one site of negotiation was clearly a winner for both of us. Mike was interested in computer mediated communication (CMC). When Dan agreed to let Mike hold the class every Wednesday in the computer room we accomplished a number of things. First, and most clearly, Mike was able to establish his expertise even though he had been assigned the role of tutor. Although he had contributed regularly each day in class, the computer space was particularly and clearly his. With Dan as a participant, Mike ran and monitored the discussions. Together we developed the prompts for computer discussion.

With the computer sessions Dan had time to observe another pedagogy at work. Dan had to relinquish control of the classroom and in so doing did not feel compelled to guide the class. Mike was the expert in a field which, at first, did not hold Dan's interest.

The computer classroom also provided a place for us to observe students' composing process. We were able to see ESL students struggle with their translation filters. We also learned to distinguish a student who was stuck and needed encouragement from one who was in repose, collecting and organizing thoughts.

Sharing responsibility was important in establishing both of our authorities. We developed and broke down, each consecutive week, a new strategy and numerous solutions in the computerized space. For instance, Mike could try a more authoritarian role and then openly discuss the problems with that role directly with Dan and even with the class. The computer classroom was recognized as a contested space. Dan clearly stated his reservations. The class discussed what worked and what did not. Like many teachers discovering the CMC classroom,

Mike had only to look at the forty or so pages that a single class hour would produce to convince himself that the time had not been wasted.

When Mike proposed that we include InterChange sessions as a regular part of the class, Dan was somewhat reluctant at first because he had experimented with it and did not like it. He expresses his reluctance in this next paragraph:

"I had ended up being frustrated with it. My feeling was that the level of conversation that was going on could be much more easily accomplished face-to-face when accountability and expression of one's words were present and embodied. With the InterChange, I thought that it was too easy to dodge accountability for one's statements and I saw this as a limitation rather than a freedom. I also had a fear of the technology, of trying to run the system. When Mike volunteered to be the 'expert' or authority for the InterChange classes, I saw this as an opportunity to learn from him. Also, it was a way to share the authority in the classroom where I really did have to step back and let him take charge. It was a move I welcomed."

By scheduling computer classes every Wednesday, the computer became integral to a week's work and we could either build up to the prompt based on what happened on Monday's class or use Friday to discuss what happened on Wednesday. We would both have responsibility for writing the prompts. Before class, we'd discuss our prompts, decide on what we wanted to accomplish that class meeting, and either rewrite or combine our prompts depending upon the degree of specificity that we wanted. For Dan, a good prompt was one that stirred thought, was open-ended, and had direction toward writing for the portfolio for he was very uneasy with dialogue for the sake of dialogue alone. The discussions needed to be working in some direction. Over time, he became more willing to let conversations go where they would. Students who were quiet in the regular classroom would have excellent things to say and worked through difficult issues.

InterChange worked for a number of reasons, and helped us accomplish different goals. It helped familiarize the students with electronic texts and technology while incorporating cyberliteracy as valid training in our writing classroom. It helped in the generation of paper topics and was an effective forum for ideas, although we both wish we could have done more with the printouts of the computer discussions.

One example which connects InterChange to the regular class is the discussion of Sandra Cisneros' *House On Mango Street*. In some ways, this less structured discussion was problematic for Dan since he wanted to see results in terms of ideas and written responses while Mike was much more inclined to have the students move the discussion of the novel where they would. Enter the InterChange. The InterChange discussions of the novel were especially good, considering the close readings the students were using to support their positions as well as the diversity of the students' positions. Rape becomes an important theme in the novel and our discussion generated an avalanche of responses. The students were conversing from both an emotional as well as a textual basis. Many made personal connections to the loss of voice in the academy. When we asked a few guiding questions, we seemed almost secondary to the discussions. This is a good example of the instructors fading out with the students taking the initiative to lead the way--we participated, but could step away from our authority roles.

Rather than just meeting an assignment handed down by us, the students were more invested in both their writing processes and the progress of the class because they had decided as a class what was important in evaluation. Students became responsible to one another--rather than writing for us, they were able to express their unhappiness or satisfaction with each other. They became interdependent and a community, rather than relying upon authority for direction and discipline. They had to take responsibility for themselves and each other.

We used a system of checks and balances to negotiate portfolio evaluation. With the class, we discussed not only what should be included in each portfolio, but also how many drafts

of each work were necessary to earn full credit. Both of us encouraged student suggestions for sometimes our expectations were not reasonable given the time and space available to the class. By asking for student input we extended our model of openly negotiating the parameters of the course.

When reviewing the portfolios, we sometimes had different opinions, yet we debated and negotiated with each other with the portfolio, using the text as a reference, in order to justify differences in evaluation. This forced us to explain and defend our subjective criteria for evaluation to each other. As such, we feel it is a good model for graduate students learning how to grade student writing since there are two sets of opinions at work that must communicate in order to evaluate. However, when it came time to meet with the students to discuss the portfolios, we assumed a much more united position as our grade-based debates were not usually seen by the students. We negotiated grades with the students after discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each portfolio, as we suggested strategies for improving writing. The strength of our grading system is that it demands a clear establishment of grading criteria first between us and then with the class.

In this model Dan and Mike offer their version of a collaborative pedagogy which encourages graduate students to teach more effectively while meeting the demands of the Basic Writing classroom. Central to our model is collaboration and dialogue between participants, which in our classroom became integral to our pedagogical practice. The circumstances under which we successfully applied our model lead us to conclude that it cannot be implemented department-wide, but instead we offer it as an alternative for teaching assistants who feel prepared to enact and committed to maintain a close relationship with a peer mentor.